

Portland Mennonite Church
Adult Sunday School Class

"Climate change and other environmental woes: A Mennonite response"

20 October - 24 November 2019

Leader: David Garen

The goal of this class is to explore the deep causal factors and ethical underpinnings of climate change and other environmental degradations. Emphasis will not be on climate and environmental science per se, although this will be covered briefly. Instead, emphasis will be upon the underlying causal human dynamics. We will explore questions like: Why have these things happened? What are the technological, economic, and social forces involved? What are the values and ethics of our current system? What can we do about these things? While looking at these underlying mechanisms, we will also consider them through the lens of Mennonite values and ethics and explore how this can provide a framework for our own thinking about them and in formulating an appropriate response.

The class will run for six Sundays. The topics will closely follow the structure of my recent online opinion article in *The Mennonite*, "Mennonite values in a warming world" (<https://themennonite.org/opinion/mennonite-values-warming-world/>). The topics will be:

- 1) Introduction -- Issues, background concepts
- 2) Simplicity: Capitalism, consumerism, and environmental externalities
- 3) Simplicity: Technology
- 4) Community
- 5) Justice and Peace
- 6) Conclusion -- Worldviews, lifestyles, politics

The class format will consist of a presentation, small group discussion of assigned questions, sharing of those discussions with the full class, and a wrap-up.

"Climate change and other environmental woes: A Mennonite response"
Sunday #1: 20 October 2019

Introduction -- Issues, background concepts

I. Overview of class structure, goals

- A. Six weeks, topics
- B. Goal is to promote critical thinking about our values, lifestyles, and consumer decisions in the context of the larger systems in which we live and the worldviews of our culture. This should then lead to responses at the personal, societal, and global scales.
- C. My background and motivations for offering this class

II. Quick review of physical causes and consequences of climate change and environmental degradation

- A. Carbon dioxide emissions -- CO₂ levels now at 410-415 ppm, pre-industrial level ~280.
- B. Climate change impacts: More intense storms; drought; more hot weather; less snow; sea level rise; ocean acidification; melting glaciers and polar ice caps; crop failures; ...
- C. Other environmental degradations: Air and water pollution; mining; deforestation; species extinction; pesticides; overfishing; agricultural runoff; soil erosion; oil spills; fracking.

III. Overview of history of environmental awareness

- A. Early advocates -- e.g., Henry David Thoreau, John Muir, Aldo Leopold
- B. Modern environmental movement of the 1960s and 1970s
- C. Agrarian ethics of Wendell Berry, Wes Jackson
- D. Increasing interest in alternatives such as "Small is Beautiful" (E.F. Schumacher), Buddhist or indigenous worldviews (1970s onward)
- E. Awareness of climate warming in late 1980s and onward
- F. Recent (since ~2000) books critiquing current technological / capitalist system and offering alternative visions (e.g., David Korten, Joel Magnuson, Joanna Macy, Naomi Klein, Gus Speth, Charles Eisenstein, etc.)

IV. Causal factors -- box diagram

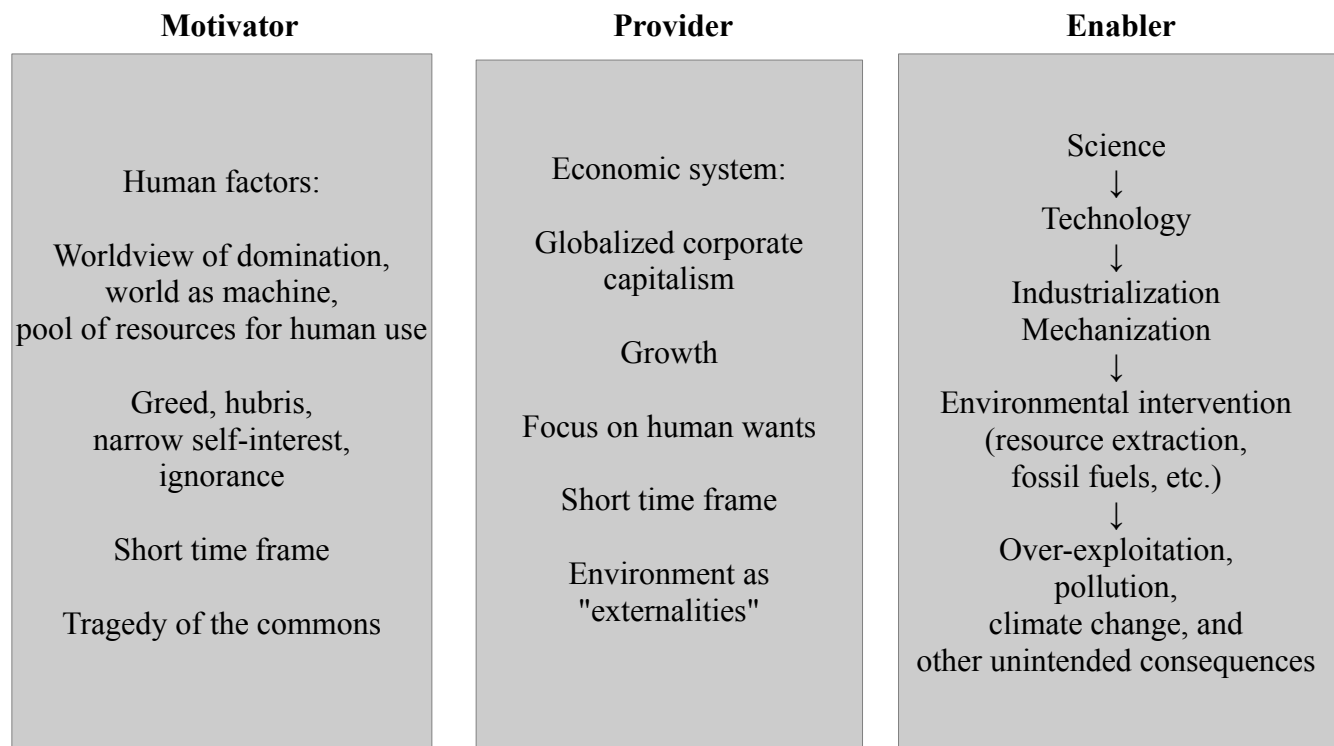
V. Key concepts

- A. Feedback, tipping points
- B. Tragedy of the commons / tyranny of small decisions / prisoner's dilemma: that is, situations where individual "goods" lead to societal "bads".
- C. Quote: "I used to think that the top environmental problems were biodiversity loss, ecosystem collapse, and climate change. I thought that thirty years of good science could address these problems. I was wrong. The top environmental problems are selfishness, greed, and apathy, and to deal with these we need a cultural and spiritual transformation. And we scientists don't know how to do that." -- James Gustave Speth

Discussion questions:

- 1) What is my personal response to climate change? Other environmental issues?
- 2) Are the various factors leading to climate change and environmental degradation (as depicted in the box diagram) surprising to you? New to you? What is your reaction to each of these things?

Causal factors of climate change and environmental degradation



These three factors interact and together have created the system that has led to environmental degradation of all kinds.

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Sunday #2: 27 October 2019

Simplicity: Capitalism, consumerism, and environmental externalities

- I. Carbon and ecological footprint; now using 1.7 earths (4 earths if everybody lived as Americans); overshoot day (have been in overshoot since 1970)
- II. Environment as "externalities" within free market capitalism economic system
- III. Globalized corporate capitalism; imperative of growth; comparative advantage; shipping costs and carbon emissions
- IV. Increased efficiency versus reduced consumption; rebound effect (Jevons paradox)
- V. Simplicity as reduced consumption: Thrift, moderation, low waste, "take only what you need" (indigenous ethic)
- VI. Simplicity as an ethic: Emphasis on family and authentic human experiences; avoidance of accumulation of and attachment to things; non-participation in unjust system (amount and sources of purchases etc.); awareness of hidden costs and injustices
- VII. Reducing carbon dioxide emissions to address climate change: Technological fixes versus reduced consumption. Sustainability of high (and growing) energy use.

Discussion questions:

- 1) Climate change and other environmental problems are huge and global in scale. Can my personal behavior make a difference?
- 2) What responsibility should I feel toward the environment and other people in my individual consumer behavior? (This question overlaps with the topics of community and justice, to be addressed in later classes.)
- 3) In light of the recent failure of the Oregon climate bill (a carbon cap-and-trade system), how reasonable is it to expect that the free market solution of "internalizing the externalities" by increasing the cost of carbon emissions and therefore increasing the cost of consumer goods is actually feasible?
- 4) Who is to blame for the (over-)use of fossil fuels -- the oil companies or ourselves?
- 5) Is non-participation in the (unjust and unsustainable) industrial-consumer system possible? How can it be done?

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Sunday #3: 3 November 2019

Simplicity: Technology

- I. Technology is such a huge part of our lives and system that it is worthy of special focus.
- II. Technology as a "Faustian bargain" -- it has given us power, wealth, comfort, convenience, and entertainment in the short term, but it always has had unintended negative consequences in the longer term, creating problems bigger and more difficult to solve than the original problem (climate change is just the latest and biggest manifestation of this). See examples in table.
- III. "Worship" of technology; looking to technology as the solution to our problems; unreflective adoption of technology in US culture.
- IV. Technology as enabler of environmental destruction; already recognized in environmental movement of 1960s and 1970s.
- V. Technology is not "value neutral". Its very existence changes things and imposes values. Examples: guns; television; atomic power/weapons; internet/smartphones
- VI. Technology has a large carbon and environmental footprint in materials, shipping, and operation.
- VII. There is no such thing as "carbon-free" electricity. Renewables have a carbon footprint in their materials, construction, installation, and maintenance.
- VIII. Technology replaces people with machines, thus eliminating jobs and increasing the use of energy. Rapid technological change is wasteful, difficult to adapt to, stressful.

Discussion questions:

- 1) Consider the list of examples of how technology has created new problems by its widespread adoption. Do you have any other examples? What are your reactions? Do you think these technologies have been worth it despite the disadvantages?
- 2) Does technology provide true needs or just wants/conveniences?
- 3) Does technology fit with a lifestyle and ethic of simplicity?
- 4) If we feel that technology is out of control or no longer helpful as a solution to human needs, is it possible for people to resist? Or is the momentum too great?

Examples of technology serving an immediate purpose but creating larger and more difficult problems later on and at a larger scale

Technology	Immediate purpose	New problems created
Automobiles	freedom, convenience, travel longer distances	air pollution, traffic, suburban sprawl, dependency on autos, fossil fuel usage (carbon emissions), fossil fuel dependence (on other countries, sometimes leading to war)
Television	entertainment, news, educational shows, easy access	"boob tube", "binge watching", poor quality of shows, exposure to advertising, passive, inactive, addictive
Pesticides, herbicides	control of organisms destructive of food crops and other pest species	affects non-target species, residues in food, direct poisoning of farm workers, ecosystem damage (e.g., DDT), cancer-causing, war weapon (e.g., Agent Orange)
Industrialized agriculture	produce more food (Green Revolution)	soil erosion, water pollution (agricultural runoff of fertilizer, pesticides, and manure), monocultures, loss of family farms, dependence on fossil fuels
Fossil fuels	inexpensive, compact source of energy	societal and economic dependence on nonrenewable unsustainable resource, air pollution, carbon dioxide emissions (climate change), dependence on imports, fracking and its environmental impacts, oil spills
Internet, smartphones	increased access to information, easier communication	hacking, loss of privacy, social media addiction, teen depression and suicide, pornography, fake news, dependence on machine instead of personal knowledge, social injustice of wealth of internet business owners (e.g., Facebook, Amazon), dependence on a complex system, energy use (including servers), devices built with unsustainable materials and from questionable sources
Fast food, junk food, soda pop	cheap, tasty food and drink	unhealthful food, obesity, diabetes, heart attacks, solid waste (packaging), cattle feedlots (to supply the meat)
Medicine	better cures, improved surgical techniques, better diagnostic tools, better health outcomes, longer lifespans	population growth, increasing cost of treatment, antibiotic-resistant strains, ethical dilemmas about who receives care and at what cost

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Sunday #4: 10 November 2019

Community

- I. Community is a strong Mennonite ethic. It is often mentioned as a critical element in addressing climate change and environmental problems. It is also a strong element in indigenous cultures. The science of ecology demonstrates community in nature.
- II. Community is not a central value in the US -- individualism is.
- III. Considering the impacts of my actions, purchases, and decisions on others is a key part of community. Everything I do impacts others in some way.
- IV. Avoiding the "Walmart effect" -- displacing local businesses, unstable low-wage jobs, long shipping distances, etc. Amazon and Uber/Lyft are other examples (note that these two are technology-enabled). Our consumer system caters to and reinforces an individualistic culture, where seeking individual advantage is all that is considered and broader social and economic effects are not. Dynamic of "tyranny of small decisions" is also at play here -- "goods" at individual scale lead to "bads" at societal scale (social externalities).
- V. Effects of adoption of technology on community, personal norms, etiquette, interaction (or lack thereof) with people. Example in Wendell Berry's novel "Jayber Crow" -- when television arrived, the practice of sitting on the porch and people walking by to chat disappeared. What does it mean to be human as we increasingly give our lives over to machines?
- VI. All consumer goods have an impact on someone in the world community in terms of working conditions, wages, environmental impact.
- VII. Sustainability as a community concern. Problems associated with unsustainable resource extraction-based local economy -- e.g., logging, coal mining, groundwater overdraft.

Discussion questions:

- 1) To what extent do you feel you should consider other people -- the community, nation, world -- in your activities, purchases, and lifestyle?
- 2) How important is it to you to consider the climate and environmental impacts of your activities, purchases, and lifestyle?
- 3) How important is it to you to support local businesses?
- 4) Does living a simple lifestyle have consequences in the community and world?
- 5) Why is community important, especially in an individualistic culture such as that of the US?

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Sunday #5: 17 November 2019

Justice and Peace

- I. Climate justice: Communities, nations, and future generations that have contributed little to no carbon emissions will be the ones most affected by climate change.
- II. Environmental justice: Communities most affected by air and water pollution and other environmental degradations are often the less affluent ones and populated by minorities. (Related recent example in Pacific Northwest: Call by Yakama Nation for removal of three lower Columbia dams, built under the Doctrine of Discovery and in violation of treaty.)
- III. North American lifestyles use far more resources than most other places in the world (ecological footprint).
- IV. Justice issues of rapid technological change -- job loss, poor working conditions, leaving people behind, expensive, wasteful.
- V. Climate warming and environmental degradation are symptoms of humans committing violence to the earth.
- VI. Current worldview: Humans as dominator and separate from nature; world is a machine and pool of resources for human use. Alternate worldview: World is a living object, worthy of respect and care; humans are part of nature; nature is part of our community; "creation care", Deep Ecology, indigenous ethics, etc.
- VII. Current lifestyles often contradict the ethic of peace. Need to move from a dominator to a partnership way of being (terminology from "The Chalice and the Blade" by Riane Eisler; very similar to example of Jesus). Need to use science and technology to live in harmony with nature, not dominate and control and exploit it. Sustainability could be seen as a concept for living at peace with the natural world.

Discussion questions:

- 1) What responsibility should we feel about the injustices of climate change and environmental degradation?
- 2) Given our current system, is it possible for people to live in a way that upholds the values of justice and peace? Or are we trapped in an unjust and unpeaceful system and can do little to change our behavior within it or the system itself? Or are we for the most part happy and satisfied with the current system?

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Sunday #6: 24 November 2019

Conclusion -- Lifestyles, worldviews, politics

- I. The topics covered in this class range widely, focusing on understanding the reasons why we have environmental problems. The Mennonite values of simplicity, community, justice, and peace can be a foundation for a lifestyle that addresses key root issues in our dominant system that have led to climate change and environmental degradation.
- II. Personal actions in and of themselves are inadequate to make all of the changes needed to address climate change and environmental degradation. But they are necessary and form the bottom-up part of a response (government being responsible for the top-down part). Personal actions can be viewed in the same way as voting -- my vote may be insignificant in and of itself, but all the votes add up. They also represent an act of faith -- I will do the right thing because it is the right thing regardless of how "effective" I think it will be but in the hope that it will make a difference.
- III. We need a new philosophy of technology. It has been the enabler for humans to cause climate change and environmental degradation. Technology may play a role in addressing these problems, but without an ethical change in our attitude toward and use of technology, we will just perpetuate our destructive trajectory and repeat the mistakes of the past in new ways.
- IV. Worldview is central. The worldview of Western industrial society is one of domination, control, separation from nature, and unsustainable exploitation. Alternative worldviews consider humans a part of nature and that we need to tread lightly on the land, respecting it and caring for it in humility. These alternatives have similar elements and can be found in indigenous cultures, Buddhist thought, Deep Ecology, and the Christian environmental concept of "creation care".
- V. It is vitally important for people who are sincere about caring for the environment to be constantly aware of and intentional about life activities and consumption. Don't let the dominant corporate/consumer/technological culture cause you to lose focus on what is important and central in life. Always be aware of how your actions, if done by many, will affect the larger society and the earth. Remember that every purchase and activity has an environmental footprint and an impact on the community. People need to "connect the dots" to maintain awareness of whether their lifestyle is consistent with their professed values or whether they just "go with the flow", following the latest consumer trends and technological gadgetry.
- VI. My personal actions are controllable by me, but I can also contribute to the political scene, if perhaps only in a limited way. Political activity contributes to the top-down component of change.
- VII. Science and technology = "brain"; ethics and values = "heart". These two must work together. Quote: "I used to think that the top environmental problems were biodiversity loss, ecosystem collapse, and climate change. I thought that thirty years of good science could address these problems. I was wrong. The top environmental problems are selfishness, greed, and apathy, and to deal with these we need a cultural and spiritual transformation. And we scientists don't know how to do that." -- James Gustave Speth

Discussion questions:

- 1) Of all the topics discussed during this class, do any stand out to you as being particularly relevant to you personally? Which ones and why?
- 2) Does all of this leave you with any hope for the future? Are humans capable of making the huge changes necessary to avoid disaster? Or is the momentum of the current system too great, and people are too unwilling to change for there to be any realistic hope for the future?